



Big Minam horse ranch

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Ernest Hudspeth, left, Roger Biswell, center, and an unidentified man pose in front of the main lodge of the Big Minam Horse Ranch in 1932 or 1933. The building remains today as Red's. (Submitted photo).

- Ethan Schowalter-Hay

The Observer

Seventy-two years ago last September, Greene Hudspeth was killed in the wilderness of the western Wallowa Mountains by accidental gunshot. Guiding a group of Portland clients from his farflung lodge, he and his good friend, Brick Richards, had separated from the rest to pursue a hefty mule deer buck. As they headed up a steep incline, Brick faltered, hampered by a bum leg. Greene offered a steady hand to his companion as they maneuvered their horses.

Brick slipped, and his rifle — the safety apparently left off by someone else — discharged. The bullet felled Greene, who died minutes later in that wild gorge, a remorse-stricken Richards and two whinnying horses by his side.

But the tragedy of his death does not dominate Greene Hudspeth's legacy, which remains bound in the famous spread known today as Red's Horse Ranch. Greene and his brothers, Wallace and Ernest, purchased the land and existing facilities in 1932 from Robert Biswell of Baker City for \$2,000, after a year of joint venture with him. The brothers established the Big Minam Horse Ranch shortly thereafter.

"The Hudspeths were actually the owners that started it as a dude ranch and guide service," notes Terry Valentine, Greene's grandson.

The lauded property, which has enjoyed a long series of owners and incarnations over its 80-odd years, lies along the Minam River, in that tangle of timbered canyons and high ridges northeast of Moss Springs.

The rugged beauty of the place is well-expressed, Terry thinks, in a quote from Ernest Hudspeth, when he revisited the ranch in 1986: "It was certainly a corner of God's garden."

The Hudspeths maintained a home spread at McEwen in the Sumpter Valley. To reach Big Minam, they packed horses on a three-day journey: first to Baker City, then to North Powder, then up to Moss Springs and into the Wallowas.

The Hudspeths sold the horse ranch in 1945 for \$7,500.

Terry, who lives in Pendleton, visited Big Minam last June for the first time, compelled after scouring his family genealogy. Pilot Joe Spence of Enterprise "took off with about a three-pound bag of oatmeal cookies," according to Terry, and flew into the remote airstrip, which lies in a meadow overlooked by the lodge buildings. Looking down upon the wild peaks and drainages, he felt overcome by personal history.

"As we were flying in there, my thoughts were running wild," he remembers. "As we flew into the canyon, I knew just where it was, without anybody telling me ... and I started getting very emotional. I couldn't wait to get on the ground — I knew I would be walking where my grandfather had."

Terry spent six days at the ranch, building gates, mending cabins, pulling weeds. Since Red's was taken over by the Forest Service in 1994, it's maintained by volunteers — with help from the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and the Fish & Wildlife Service — who rotate on a weekly basis from April to November. While there, Terry rode a horse to Chaparral Canyon, where his grandfather was killed.

Terry plans to regularly visit the horse ranch: "As long as I'm able." Next summer, he hopes to bring Greene's surviving children — Terry's mother, Mary Hudspeth Thompson, his aunt, Jean Hudspeth Marrs, and his uncle, Bill Hudspeth — up there.

"Just to have them sit down and reminisce ... and put it on tape," he says.

Mary, who was 4 years old when Greene died, doesn't remember much about her father, but those memories she does have are warm.

"I just knew he was a great guy," she says. "Us kids, we were always loved and kept."

On account of her diminutive size at birth, Greene nicknamed her "Babe."

Terry says he doesn't recall his great-uncle, Wallace, who helped raise Greene's children after his death (and had a hand in Terry's upbringing), talking much about the Minam days.

Mary points out, "It was such a bad memory to them (the family)."

"Most of what I heard was that Grandpa was a tremendous horseman," Terry says.

Greene was described as a resourceful and iconic man in a 1935 newspaper article by Frank Cox, who was hunting at Big Minam when the tragedy occurred.

"We found Greene Hudspeth, resident manager of (the horse) ranch, possessed of many qualities that writers of western romances delight in attributing to their glamorous heroes," Cox wrote. "His quickly proven efficiency and engaging personality made it evident that we were rightly placed."

After Greene's death, Mary recalls, Richards — who by Cox's account made an immediate and mournful confession — was briefly placed in jail. Her mother, Rachel, made sure he was quickly released (the coroner had ruled Greene's death an accident, so it's not clear why Richards ended up behind bars at all).

"She just came flat unglued when she found out they put him in jail," Mary says. "She said, 'It was an accident — I want him out of there.'"

Of Greene's widow, who passed away in 2000, Terry remembers, "Grandma was a fantastic cook."

Rachel had remarried Richard Daly, and lived out her later years in Fossil.

Terry is quick to credit the many people who have figured into the ranch's long and colorful history. The slew of wranglers who helped the Hudspeth brothers and other owners out, he says, "were the people that made it work."

And he has nothing but kind words for Red.

"Red kept it going," he said. "He kept what my grandfather did alive."

The labor of dedicated help, he emphasizes, ensures the property's survival. He says the Forest Service must be commended for their efforts, and for supplying the tools used for upkeep.

"It's a part of history that needs to be preserved," he adds, "and the volunteers go up there and work their butts off to do that."

A windstorm recently damaged some of the historic structures at the ranch, including a century-old barn that may have to be salvaged, Terry says.

Meanwhile, the Hudspeth family will be back, preserving a lineage that is but one chapter in that secluded meadow's long story.



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